

RESEARCH TITLE

Speaking in the EFL Classroom: Teacher-Student Reflection

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to obtain teachers and learners' perspectives on the teaching and learning of one of the essential language skills, namely speaking. The study aims to determine the main obstacles learners encounter in speaking and propose remedies to overcome those challenges. Hence, Adopting action research as a methodological framework, the data used in the study were collected via classroom observation and follow-up unstructured interviews in different institutions. The subjects were all students at three Libyan higher institutions majoring in English language (i.e. freshmen, sophomores... etc.). We had beginners, intermediate, and advanced levels. Having observed different classes while teaching and running learners' unplanned interviews, we noticed individual differences and different learning styles. During classroom lessons, some issues, such as, anxiety, lack of motivation, lack of confidence or lack of linguistic knowledge were triggered, ... etc. and thus learning is negatively affected. However, learners have the chance to improve, and overcome these challenges. It had argued that instructors should incorporate speaking activities into their lesson plans, such as debates or presentations, to give learners opportunities to practice speaking in a structured environment. In fact, as the classes went on the input was enriched with materials and many activities as role-play, presentations or dialogues. Some of which were graded as bonus points to enhance learners' motivation. As learners encouraged practicing these activities, their output started to improve noticeably. Eventually, students share their improvement pace with satisfaction. Then, learners could compete with all the challenges and reach their learning goals. As this study moved to notice all actions in class, and reflect on both the materials and students' participation, we could diagnose detailed students' issues in speaking. Then we manage to help students build on knowledge and confidence to start expressing themselves without fear or reluctance. Also, class instructors are highly encouraged to adopt authentic materials, and real task activities to enhance speaking.

Key Words: Speaking Skills, EFL, Challenges, Motivation, Reflection, Remedies.

1. Introduction

Mastering a foreign language requires the development of strong speaking abilities, especially in the setting of an EFL classroom. According to Gass and Varonis (2014), effective verbal communication not only improves comprehension and expression but also develops the understanding of the target language. In order to better understand the critical role that speaking plays in EFL instruction, this paper will examine how teachers and students view language acquisition and effective communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2008). According to Brown (2004), speaking is an efficient skill that can be directly and empirically observed. A speaker must be well-versed in both the micro and macro aspects of speaking in order to effectively communicate to an audience.

EFL education is essential for fostering cross-linguistic and cross-cultural cooperation in a society that is becoming more diverse and interconnected (Crystal, 2003). The ESL classroom acts as a hub for language learning, encouraging students to improve their speaking abilities through participation in conversations, dialogues, and active interaction. Also, teachers must critically evaluate their pedagogical strategies, instructional approaches, and how their direction affects students' speaking skills as they serve as facilitators in this linguistic expedition (Richards & Schmit, 2013). Students are additionally urged to actively engage in self-reflection. This entails assessing their language development, recognizing challenges, and adopting tactics to improve their speaking skills (Nunan, 1991). In order to illuminate successful teaching strategies for the ESL classroom that foster language acquisition and promote effective communication, this research will delve into the practice of reflection (Vygotsky, 1978).

Moreover, it is essential for ESL educators to comprehend the sociocultural elements that affect speaking ability. The speaking abilities of ESL learners are greatly impacted by cultural backgrounds in terms of communication norms and styles (Gudykunst, 2005). Additionally, measures to increase intrinsic motivation play a crucial part in successful language acquisition. Learner motivation and engagement are pivotal aspects determining speaking proficiency (Dörnyei, 2009).

Therefore, the study was an attempt to penetrate into the classroom to uncover the challenges and remedies. In fact, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the main obstacles students encounter in speaking classes?
2. What are the remedies to overcome these difficulties?

2. Methodology

The goal of this research is to investigate the causes of resistance in EFL oral communication lessons as well as learners' perceptions of the subject. With this specific goal in mind, the researchers attempt to identify the sources of resistance noticed among students enrolled in English oral communication classes in an EFL environment.

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted an action research as methodological framework, which is used to acquire insights into the viewpoints of EFL instructors and learners on the improvement of speaking abilities in the classroom environment

To analyze and improve teaching and learning methods, action research allows for an interactive process of preparing, acting, observing, and reflecting. The study intends to dive deeply into the complexity of language learning and effective communication in EFL environments through the use of this approach.

2.2. Participants

Participants were students from a variety of Libyan educational institutions in English departments, with varying proficiency levels (beginning, intermediate, and advanced) and educational backgrounds. Purposive sampling was used to choose individuals based on their desire to

participate, guaranteeing representation from all skill levels and educational contexts. The inclusion of a varied participant pool attempts to capture a wide range of opinions and experiences about speaking skills in EFL context.

2.3.Data Collection

A multifaceted approach to data collection was implemented to gather comprehensive insights. These include classroom observation and participants feedback.

3.1.Observations:

Observations were carried out in a systematic manner in order to document teaching pedagogies, classroom dynamics, and student engagement during speaking activities. The types of speaking exercises used and the nature of student interactions were meticulously documented, providing a thorough understanding of the dynamics at work.

3.2.Unstructured Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to gain a better understanding of their perspectives, challenges, and methods for fostering speaking fluency. These unstructured interviews provided rich qualitative data for analysis, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of individual experiences and viewpoints.

2.4.Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to examine the collected data. We carefully coded, classified, and reviewed data from observations in the classroom, interviews, and document analysis to find frequent trends, patterns, and important insights to adopt in speaking skills field.

3. Results

3.1.Identified Obstacles in Speaking Skills

The examination of unstructured interviews and classroom observations revealed a number of barriers that EFL students faced when trying to improve their speaking abilities. These challenges include nervousness, a lack of drive, problems with confidence, and mainly linguistic deficiencies. It was discovered that these difficulties appeared differently for different proficiency levels and learners' styles.

3.2.Impact of Structured Speaking Activities:

In classroom settings, structured speaking exercises like role-plays, debates, presentations, dialogues and group work were in action throughout the course. The results showed that there is an effect on the motivation and speaking ability of EFL learners. When these activities were incorporated into lesson plans, students' speaking skills clearly improved, and their motivation levels increased. The noticeable improvement was also due to encouragement and grading for participation without fear of making mistakes.

3.3.Incorporation of Diverse Materials and Activities

The use of a variety of resources, such as authentic materials and graded speaking tasks, greatly improved the speaking skills and internal motivation of EFL learners. Learning outcomes and participation were significantly enhanced when a variety of activities, including role-plays, free of choice presentation topics, and dialogues, were added to the classroom curriculum and students were rewarded with bonus points.

3.4.Individual Differences and Learning Styles

The study emphasized how individual variances and learning preferences affect EFL students' speaking ability. The identification of these variables highlighted the necessity of flexible teaching strategies that accommodate a range of learning styles and backgrounds, ultimately improving speaking abilities.

4. Discussion

Reviewing the insights of Gass and Varonis (2014), Crystal, (2003) and others in the field, we observed the essence of incorporating a variety of materials into EFL classrooms and implementing structured speaking activities in order to improve speaking proficiency. The effectiveness of these pedagogical approaches is suggested by the observed improvement in learners' speaking abilities through debates, presentations, and other activities. Furthermore, creating a supportive learning environment for the development of speaking skills required acknowledging and embracing individual differences and learning styles.

Nation and Newton (2009) insisted that instructors should incorporate speaking activities into their lesson plans, such as debates or presentations. The significance of dynamic and interactive teaching methodologies is indicated by the positive correlation observed between enhanced speaking abilities, active classroom engagement, and diverse materials. Real-world tasks and authentic materials were essential in boosting students' intrinsic motivation, enticing them to participate actively, and promoting language learning.

According to Nunan, (1991) and Richards & Schmidt's, (2013) arguments regarding students engagements and educators' reflections and assessments of their pedagogies, our discussion emphasizes the necessity for educators to adopt reflective teaching practices, adjusting their instruction to accommodate diverse backgrounds and preferences. Such reflective approaches were fundamental in addressing learners' challenges and encouraging their confidence in expressing themselves effectively.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, this study clarifies the critical role that varied resources, structured speaking exercises, and thoughtful teaching strategies play in improving the speaking abilities of ESL students. Through the implementation of effective pedagogical strategies and the resolution of identified obstacles, learners exhibited notable enhancements in their motivation levels and speaking abilities.

The study stresses the value of customizing teaching strategies to meet the needs of each individual student and promotes the ongoing integration of a variety of activities and resources into EFL classrooms. By making these kinds of efforts, teachers can establish a setting that helps EFL students acquire language and become proficient speakers. The results also highlight the need for continued research and the application of cutting-edge teaching strategies in order to continuously enhance EFL instruction and students' speaking ability.

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